

# The Holistic Leader

by Sharon Shinn

If Jaro Horvath has just gotten off the phone with an irate client and is about to step into an important meeting with the dean, he takes a moment to make sure he doesn't carry the stress of the first encounter into the second one. To improve his mindset, he pulls out a laminated card that poses a series of questions: *What is the dominant thought I'm struggling with? What is the benefit of keeping this thought? How could I reframe this thought and what would the benefits be?*

"If I take 30 seconds to think about these things so I can go into the meeting more focused on clear goals and strategies, there will be a much better outcome," says Horvath, director of corporate learning at Thunderbird School of Global Management in Glendale, Arizona.

These "reframing" exercises are only one part of a new initiative launched at Thunderbird last fall that stresses mental, emotional, and physical health as key components of a management education. "What's required of today's leaders—in addition to functional skills—is focus, clarity, creativity, and confidence," says Horvath. "But these all can be learned."

Three business programs teach students to integrate mind, body, and spirit to become more effective leaders.



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—Jolene Bodily, University of Virginia

And they *need* to be learned so leaders can survive today’s calamitous business environment. “We’re living in unprecedented times,” says Horvath. “The challenges faced by executives are much greater, because the business environment is complex and changing fast. Some people are energized and motivated by this, but others are overwhelmed. Only those who are prepared will be successful.”

Thunderbird isn’t the only business school emphasizing holistic approaches to improving executive performance. Several others—including the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and Melbourne Business School at the University of Melbourne in Australia—offer programs that incorporate physical exercise and personal reflection into business and leadership curricula.

“We believe healthy and fit executives are more effective leaders, and so we offer a highly integrated program that looks at the connections among physical, mental, and emotional capabilities,” says Jolene Bodily, director of Darden’s executive education wellness program. “If leaders have these components in balance, they’re likely to have more stamina, more depth, more resilience, and even increased cognitive abilities.”

Both executives and academics might scoff at the notion that a Pilates class can improve performance, and program administrators acknowledge that some stakeholders are skeptical. But they cite measurable returns and tell stories about passionate converts as they make the case that a holistic approach to business education results in more effective leaders.

### Pillars of Performance

At Thunderbird, the link between learning and well-being was cemented last fall when the school began a collaboration with Tignum’s Institute for Sustainable High Performance. Tignum, which has offices in Phoenix, Europe, and Dubai, teaches people to build energy, resilience, and mental capacity by paying attention to the four pillars of holistic health: mindset, nutrition, movement, and recovery.

Last August, Thunderbird held a kickoff event to introduce faculty, staff, and students to Tignum’s approach. The following week, during orientation, all incoming MBA, MA, and MS students went through sustainable high-performance sessions led by Tignum. Like sessions on negotiation and cross-cultural understanding, these events were mandatory. Students also received “high-performance kits,” including tennis balls, sports cords, jump drives of content about the four pillars, and laminated cards filled with reminder information.

To help everyone on campus remember key strategies, the school has relied on follow-up campaigns that included intranet coaching, strategically posted signs in the cafeteria and student lounges, and reminder messages in the school newspaper and newsletter. A very focused follow-up campaign that unrolled in October during the career fair was designed to help students cope with the stresses of interviews and internships.

So far, says Horvath, response has been overwhelmingly positive. He hopes that enthusiasm stays high—and that results are long-term.

“All of us are products of habits we have developed over the years,” he says. “Many of those habits, good or bad, are developed when we are young and think we are invincible. At Thunderbird, we feel we have a great opportunity to make a difference early in students’ careers by helping them develop good habits that will pay off for years to come.”

While the first phase of the sustainable high-performance program is aimed at existing students and faculty, Thunderbird plans to add segments to customized executive education programs for interested clients. The full Tignum program includes testing and assessment followed by a two-day program, which is then followed by six months of coaching. Scaled-down versions include two- or three-hour sessions that are supplemented with conference calls or SMS reminder messages about exercise and nutrition.

Horvath has participated in some of the briefer Tignum sessions and found the strategies to be “pragmatic, relatively simple, but profound—and life changing.” For example, he’s an athlete who regularly goes mountain biking and runs marathons. But he learned that the “movement” part of sustainable high-performance isn’t just about exercise.

“There are so many opportunities in the day for less active people to fire up left- and right-brain functions so they’re more alert in meetings,” he says. “They can make a choice of walking up the stairs instead of taking the elevator. Because they move their feet, they focus their minds, and they perform better in that meeting.”

But the real strength of the program, says Horvath, is that it makes participants more aware of how every aspect of their lives can affect their work performance. “What we eat affects the way we move, the way we move affects our mindset, and the way we sleep affects everything,” he notes. “Integrating the four pillars makes the program successful.”

### The Healthy Executive

At the Darden School of Business, the integration of mind and body has become a key part of executive education. The focus is particularly strong in the Executive Program, a



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four-week open enrollment program held in the summer. As it begins, all participants receive personal health profiles and have their measurements taken; they attend classes on nutrition, sleep, and exercise, and learn how cognitive abilities are affected by physical, emotional, and mental health.

And then they get moving. Every weekday morning opens with a 6 a.m. exercise session run by wellness director Bodily. By the time they get to their 8 o'clock class, participants are fully engaged.

"The exercise teams become de facto learning teams as the participants talk to each other while they're walking and running," says David Newkirk, Darden's CEO for Executive Education. "Once they've already been out and exercised, there's no way they're going to come to class and just sit back. They're already in the game."

The exercise doesn't stop there. This year, Darden has added "no-sweat breaks," or "sparks," right after lunch. These exercises enhance strength or flexibility but don't require a change into gym clothes. Newkirk notes that "1 to 1:30 has always been a real dead time in the classroom as people try to process all the refined starches and sugars. This break has really changed the afternoon."

At the end of the four weeks, Bodily again assesses health and physical measurements for all participants. In most programs, she says, the groups show statistically significant improvements in six out of nine areas, and all areas "move in a positive direction." She adds, "Total body weight drops, waist girth drops, total cholesterol and LDL drop, and blood pressure goes down."

But Bodily doesn't want executives to go back to work and go back to their bad habits. She wants them to change their mindsets for good. During the four-week program, she puts participants through a variety of exercises—including

yoga, strength training, flexibility classes, and cardio classes—with the hope that one will appeal to them so much they'll continue it once the program is over. She also supplies resistance bands and instruction sheets so they can continue these brief workouts once they're back at the home office.

And many do. Bodily says, "People think, 'I used to do all this, but I haven't lately, because my life is so hectic.' It feels so good that they want to figure out how to incorporate exercise into their lives again. They feel that way even more once they measure how much they've improved."

While the four-week Executive Program is the one most focused on health and wellness, Darden also offers similar components in executive MBA programs, shorter open enrollment programs, and customized executive education packages. Many custom clients are interested "because they're always looking for something that feels new and fresh," says Newkirk.

It's not surprising that the wellness components are particularly effective in the four-week program, he says, since psychologists estimate that it takes 28 days for people to change any habit. But even in shorter classes, wellness components can have a big impact, especially when Bodily follows up with reminder emails to keep executives focused on nutrition and exercise.

While Newkirk admits he thought it might be difficult to get hard-charging executives to talk about managing their health issues, that hasn't been the case. He points out that executives must always be aware of how they must manage *themselves* in order to do their jobs.

"To have a class where they seriously talk about how they spend their time, how they manage their stress, and how they deal with their needs in the context of the office legitimizes discussions they need to have as leaders," he says. "Our leadership faculty say that leadership is essentially about the conversations executives have with their organizations. These classes change those conversations."

### The Mindful Leader

At the Melbourne Business School, two professors are convinced that thoughtful, engaged leaders are far more effective than their more heroic, command-and-control counterparts. In 2007, Amanda Sinclair, Foundation Professor of Management in Diversity and Change, and Richard Searle, program director of executive education, debuted a Mindful

Leadership program through the university's executive education arm. The program draws on their mutual interest in meditation, neuroscience, and leadership to take a different approach to how adults can learn to lead more effectively in today's stressful environment.

Sinclair had been teaching a yoga class since 2005, so it was only natural for her to collaborate with Searle on a leadership course that combined yoga, reflection, and discussion. Today, the Mindful Leadership course draws a diverse mix of CEOs, government employees, consultants who teach leadership development themselves, and heads of nonprofits.

Those in the latter group are particularly interested, says Sinclair. "They're often on shoestring budgets, trying to mobilize volunteers and a staff that isn't highly paid. They want to know, 'How can I provide a model that's inspiring and helpful?'"

Participants enroll for a variety of reasons. "Sometimes they're desperate for something like a circuit breaker," Sinclair says. "Sometimes there's been a new event in their lives, such as the birth of a baby, a health scare, or a relationship issue, and this has guided them to explore the benefits of mindfulness. People often will discuss the issues they're struggling with if we make a space for them to come forward and talk."

The Mindful Leadership program consists of equal parts reflection, discussion, and content, says Sinclair. The class opens with a half hour of yoga to help people reconnect with their bodies. A morning meditation is supplemented throughout the day with shorter meditation sessions, and participants eat lunch in silence to spend that time in reflection.

The goal is for participants to "slow down, listen, and notice what's going on with themselves and others," says Sinclair. When they do, they listen more closely, respond more



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## Taking the First Steps

For schools that are interested in adding exercise, meditation, and other holistic elements to their business programs, here are some thoughts to consider:

■ **Start small.** Darden's Jolene Bodily encourages schools to look at the resources they already have. "Are there student fitness facilities they can use? Can they partner with other areas of the university?" she asks. But there's another critical component, she says. "Schools need to make it acceptable—and even desirable—for people in executive education and full-time MBA programs to take time for these activities."

■ **Provide some direction.** Post mileage charts for specific walking routes around campus, says Bodily—even routes through the interiors of buildings, so students and faculty can get their exercise on inclement days. Most people don't realize that a walk up stairs and through hallways can add up to significant exercise over the course of a day.

■ **Model desirable behavior.** Faculty trying to add a reflective component to their programs should practice mindfulness and meditation in their own lives, says Amanda Sinclair of the Melbourne Business School. "Be open and appreciative and trust people to respond," she says.

■ **Read up on the topic.** Sinclair recommends a handful of books about mindfulness, brain science, and transformative leadership: *Leadership for the Disillusioned* by Sinclair; *The Brain that Changes Itself* by Norman Doidge; *Quiet Leadership* by David Rock; *I.D.: The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century* by Susan Greenfield; *Coming to Our Senses* and other books by Jon Kabat-Zinn; and *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*, by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers.

■ **Reach out to like-minded stakeholders.** During the global financial

thoughtfully, and demonstrate authenticity. “Instead of shooting out comments on a topic, they hear each other. Someone might say, ‘What you just said on this topic connects to an experience I had that I’d like to share with the group.’ They can see leadership being played out right before their eyes.”

To help participants retain their lessons, Sinclair and Searle invite them to write letters to themselves about what they’ve learned and what their goals are. An email group helps participants stay in touch once they’re back at work, so they can discuss the impact of their new attitudes on their lives.



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Sinclair and Searle also incorporate the topic of mindfulness into the mainstream leadership courses they teach in Melbourne’s executive education and MBA programs. For instance, in a five-day executive education program, they discuss more conventional leadership topics during the first half of the course, then introduce mindfulness and meditation on the third or fourth day.

Despite its yoga and meditation components, the Mindful Leadership program is not a course geared toward health and well-being, according to Sinclair. “It’s a leadership program, and mindfulness is at the heart of leadership,” she says. “Well-being is often one of the outcomes, but the outcome

we’re most interested in is improving effectiveness and changing organizational cultures so workplaces are better places for people to be.”

crisis, says Sinclair, she had some fear that the Mindful Leadership program would be cut from Melbourne’s executive education schedule. But alumni and people who had benefited from the program proved willing to support it through sponsorships and other aid.

■ **Consider your mission.** To attract the support of internal stakeholders, make sure that any new program aligns with the school mission and elicits heartfelt commitment, says Thunderbird’s Jaro Horvath. “Why would someone be interested in a project that the school isn’t committed to and doesn’t really believe in?” he says.

■ **Determine how bold you can be.** “Evaluate the organization’s ability to undertake an initiative of this nature, because it might be outside the scope of a business school,” says Horvath. He quickly adds that schools need to re-evaluate what their scope *should* be. “We live in unprecedented times that put higher and higher demands on the leaders we’re educating,” he says. “We might be educating students today for jobs that don’t yet exist. So it is our responsibility to equip students with tools that will help them navigate uncharted waters.”

### Invaluable Integration

Sinclair and her counterparts at Thunderbird and Darden know that CEOs with an interest in health or yoga could just as easily sign up for a high-end spa retreat at Canyon Ranch. So why do they choose to attend executive education courses instead? These administrators believe that the real draw is that element of *integration*—the physical and mental components combined with a focus on the functional disciplines.

“We show participants that exercise and nutrition can increase their stamina and their cognitive function,” says Bodily. “They realize that they need academic skills, and they also need physical, emotional, and mental skills for the complete leadership package.”

Newkirk adds that an executive education program is the perfect arena for participants to experiment with new outlooks on what they do. “It’s like a sign that one of our faculty has posted,” says Newkirk. “It says, ‘Pick a new place to sit, and see the world differently.’”

But in the end, they agree, it all comes down to creating better leaders. If performance is tied to a strong body and an open mind, schools like these three have figured out the keys to improving executive effectiveness. In troubled times, CEOs need clear heads, robust constitutions, *and* business acumen—and the programs that will help them sharpen all three. **Z**